

## 8 honored for heroism during Navy Yard shootings

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Navy Secretary Ray Mabus awards the Navy and Marine Corps Medal to Master At Arms 3rd Class Denise Torres, one of the eight sailors honored June 23 for heroic actions during the Washington Navy Yard shootings on Sept. 16, 2013. (Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images)

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Members of Naval District Washington family gathered at the Washington Navy Yard on Monday to honor a group of civilians and sailors for their bravery and service in the midst of last year's mass shooting that traumatized the Navy.

Four officers and four enlisted sailors received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, the service's highest valor award for non-combat actions, for pursuing the gunman, helping personnel to shelter in place or evacuate, and providing medical care to wounded personnel on Sept. 16, 2013, as then-contractor Aaron Alexis went on a rampage inside the Naval Sea Systems Command headquarters, killing 12 civilians.

"As a family, we grieved, and we continue to grieve," said Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, who hosted the ceremony. "We gather here, again, as a family, to recognize the heroism of those we lost and the heroism of those who confronted evil on that day last fall."

The recipients of the Navy and Marine Corps Medal: Capt. Timothy Crone, Senior Chief Master-at-Arms Brandon Denison, Capt. Edward Zawislak, Lt. Cmdr. Michael Melia, Capt. Christopher Mercer, Master-at-Arms 3rd Class Denise Torres, MA2 Dominic Outlaw and MA2 Charles Pitt.

Mabus also presented the 12 fallen civilians posthumously with the Distinguished Civilian Service Medal for Valor. Sixteen survivors and first responders were also presented with that honor for their actions in minimizing the casualties.

"A day like this is good for closure for a lot of folks," Crone said in an interview after the ceremony. "It could have been a lot worse, but we made it out of that building with minimal losses due to the heroic actions of the local police department and a lot of our family taking care of each other."

Mercer also gave credit to fellow NAVSEA personnel.

"You saw that in every square foot of the building," he said after the event. "Somebody helping somebody get down the stairs, get shelter. It was just like the SECNAV and [Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jon Greenert] said: We are shipmates, and shipmates were taking care of shipmates that day."

Building 197, NAVSEA's former headquarters, has been shut down since the shooting and is currently under construction. Many of its personnel hadn't seen each other since the shooting, as several offices were moved to other NAVSEA spaces at the Navy Yard, or to the Coast Guard facility at Buzzard Point.

The ceremony marked a reunion of sorts, especially for Zawislak, who received his NMCM for tending to a gunshot victim while emergency personnel made their way to the roof of the NAVSEA building. He got to catch up with her at the ceremony.

"I call her Superwoman, Wonder Woman," he said of the civilian employee, who was shot right in front of him as he evacuated the building.

After making it to the roof with two more employees, Zawislak used his uniform jacket to pack the woman's wounds and stem the bleeding until a SWAT team arrived.

The ceremony also provided a way forward for Naval District Washington, said Vice Adm. William Hilarides, the head of NAVSEA.

Since the shooting, the Navy Yard had been concerned with providing support to base employees, their families and the victims' families, as well as reviewing security and emergency procedures to keep everyone safe in the future.

"The last nine months, there's been a series of events to deal with the tragedy," he said. "This is a real forward-looking event, which honors the survivors for heroism and looks forward to building on the resilience it created to move the command forward."

SECNAV also bestowed the Navy's Merit for Group Achievement Award upon organizations who stepped up in response to the tragedy: the Crime Victim's Compensation Program, the D.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the D.C. Department of Behavioral Health, the mayor's office, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Hope Animal-Assisted Crisis Response, the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department, the Justice Department, the Wendt Center for Loss and Healing, and Survivors and Advocates for Empowerment.